PATTERNS OF POWER

The Strangest Dictatorship

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Turkmenistan Under Niyazov and the Berdimuhamedows, 1991 to the Present — a Twelve-Module Study of an Order the Outside World Files Under Absurdity: the Golden Rotating Statue, the Prophet-President's Holy Book Set Beside the Quran, the Months Renamed After the Ruler's Mother, the Ban on Beards and Lip-Syncing and Dogs in the Capital — Read Not as the Whims of a Madman but as the Coherent, Legible Moves of Men Solving Real Problems From a Real Position: How a Soviet Apparatchik With No Tribe and No Nation Behind Him Manufactures a Nation and a Faith to Stand On, How a Gas Rent Buys a Whole People's Compliance Without a Single Argument, and How a Family With No Blood Claim to a Throne Nonetheless Builds One and Passes It to a Son. Held as Tested, Not Revealed

Preface

thomas j. Bryan (with Claude, Anthropic)

A STUDY IN THE PATTERNS OF POWER

Turkmenistan is the case Western observers reach for when they want an example of a dictatorship so bizarre it defies analysis. The catalogue is genuinely strange: a president who renamed the month of January after himself and April after his dead mother, who wrote a book he declared the spiritual equal of the Quran and made its recitation a requirement for a driving licence, who raised a gold-plated statue of himself that rotated so as always to face the sun, who banned dogs from the capital for their smell, banned lip-syncing at weddings, banned gold teeth and long hair on men, and had physicians swear an oath of loyalty to him in place of the oath of Hippocrates. His successor, a former dentist, dismantled the strangest of these decrees and then, within a few years, built a near-identical cult around himself, complete with his own honorific — Arkadag, the Protector — his own equestrian statue in gold, and his own volumes displacing his predecessor's on the nation's desks. When that successor handed the presidency to his own son in 2022 while keeping real power for himself, the world's press treated the whole thing as a curiosity, a comic-opera despotism in a country most of its readers could not place on a map.

This study takes the opposite view, not because the strangeness is not real but because "strange" is a description, not an explanation, and this collection exists to convert the first into the second. The wager of the whole method is that there are no strange rulers, only rulers

whose position we have not yet reconstructed — that the same benefit-against-cost engine runs in a Turkmen president's head as in a Roman emperor's or a modern chief executive's, and that what looks like madness from the outside is very often the single most rational move available once you stand where the ruler actually stands. The claim of this study, worked module by module, is that almost every genuinely baffling feature of Turkmenistan dissolves into clean logic the moment three facts about the ruler's position are held in view: that the first president inherited a country that was not a nation and a throne he had no traditional right to sit on, that the ground beneath both president and people is a lake of natural gas large enough to buy compliance outright, and that the deepest problem any such ruler faces is not the people below him but the family and the elite beside him. Read through those three facts, the golden statue is not a lunatic's vanity. It is infrastructure.

A Note on this Collaboration and Sources

The framework is Thomas J. Bryan's; the research and drafting are Claude's (Anthropic). This is a study of a living order, and its later modules describe events still unfolding as it is written, so its factual claims are drawn from the current record and dated where precision matters. The reign of Saparmurat Niyazov, the Ruhnama, the calendar renaming, and the personality cult are documented from the standard reference and journalistic record; the tribal substrate from the ethnographic and area-studies literature; the gas economy and the subsidy regime from the International Energy Agency, the Asian Development Bank, and the specialist energy press; and the 2022 dynastic succession and its aftermath from the regional analysis of Chatham House, the Diplomat, Eurasianet, and Radio Free Europe, among others. Where a figure is contested — Turkmenistan's own gas-reserve claims run well above independent estimates, and its election returns are not credible as vote counts — the study says so and reads the number for what it reveals rather than what it asserts. The country is one of the most closed on earth, and much of what happens inside its elite is genuinely unknown; where the study reaches the edge of the record it marks the edge rather than inventing across it.

MODULE 1 · THE FLOOR OF FORCE — THE FOUNDING CONQUEST

The founding of independent Turkmenistan is unusual in this collection because there was no founding conquest at all, in the ordinary sense. No army marched, no city fell, no dynasty was overthrown. On 27 October 1991, as the Soviet Union dissolved around it, the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic simply became the independent state of Turkmenistan, and the man who had run it as First Secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party since 1985, Saparmurat Niyazov, transitioned without a break into its president. The floor of force he inherited was not one he built. It was the intact coercive apparatus of a Soviet republic — the police, the security organs, the ministries, the party structure — handed to him whole by the collapse of the power that had created it. What makes the case a study in the floor of force is not how Niyazov seized it, which required nothing, but the specific weakness of the ground it stood on, because that weakness explains almost everything strange that followed.

Niyazov's problem was that he had inherited the machinery of a state without the substance of a nation. Turkmenistan was a territory whose borders had been drawn by Soviet cartographers in the 1920s, populated by a people who had never in their history been unified under a single native government and who did not, in any deep sense, think of themselves as a single people at all. The Turkmen were tribes — the Teke, largest and dominant, concentrated in the southern Ahal

region around the capital and in Mary; the Yomut in the west and north; the Ersari in the east along the Amu Darya; and beneath them more than a dozen smaller groupings, each with its own ancestor, its own dialect, its own territory, and a strong tradition of marrying only within itself. For most of recorded history the Turkmen had been known to their neighbours as tribal raiders without political unity, powerful enough to trouble Persia and the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara but never organised into a state of their own. The very name of the presidential tribe's heartland, Gokdepe, marked the site of the 1881 battle where Turkmen resistance to Russian conquest had been broken. This was the raw material Niyazov had to rule: not a nation with a shared story that could be turned to his account, but a collection of tribes whose primary loyalties ran to lineages older than the borders of the country he now governed, and one of which — his own Ahal Teke — was already resented by the others as the group that held the capital and the power.

The floor of force, then, was real but narrow. Niyazov commanded the inherited Soviet security apparatus, and that apparatus was entirely sufficient to crush any individual who challenged him — the country's later record of disappeared dissidents and torture is not in doubt. But raw coercion could not solve his actual problem, which was that a state resting on the security organs of one tribe over a population of several was brittle at exactly the seams the framework teaches us to watch. A floor of force that has to be visibly applied to hold a population is expensive and dangerous; the cheap and durable order is the one where the governed hold it up themselves. Niyazov, an orphan raised in a Soviet institution with no tribal power base of

his own to speak of and a nation that did not yet exist to be loyal to him, needed to manufacture the one thing his inherited floor could not supply: a reason for the whole population, across every tribe, to believe that his rule was theirs. Everything the outside world would come to call strange was his attempt to build that reason from nothing.

MODULE 2 · THE SETTLEMENT — WHO GOT WHAT

The settlement beneath Turkmenistan runs on a single substance, and naming it dissolves a great deal of the country's apparent mystery at a stroke: natural gas. Turkmenistan sits on one of the largest proven reserves of natural gas on earth — placed by independent estimates among the top five or six national reserves in the world, and by the country's own considerably inflated claims higher still — and the entire structure of who holds what in the country is organised around the capture and division of the rent that gas produces. This is what the political economists call a rentier state, and the term is precise: the government's income does not come, in any significant measure, from taxing the productive activity of its own citizens. It comes from selling a natural resource abroad, which means the state does not need its people to be economically productive, or free, or even willing, in order to be funded. It needs only to control the gas and the pipelines that carry it out.

That control is total and it is held at the very top. The gas is produced and marketed by a state company, Turkmengaz; the oil by Turkmenoil; the power by Turkmenergo; and the revenue from all of it flows not into anything resembling a national treasury subject to public accounting but into the hands of the presidency itself, which in Turkmenistan is not meaningfully distinct from the person of the president and his family. The settlement, in other words, places the wealth monopoly and the violence monopoly in exactly the same

hands — there is no separate merchant class holding wealth the ruler must bargain with, no landed aristocracy with an independent economic base, no private sector of any consequence that the state does not control. This fusion is the single most important structural fact about the order after the gas itself, and the framework flags it immediately as the signature of a foreclosed rather than a contestable order: where one coalition holds violence, wealth, and information together, there is no institution outside the ruler's grip from which a challenge could be funded or organised.

The inside of the settlement — the apex coalition itself — is drawn along the tribal lines Module 1 described. Under Niyazov the Ahal Teke, his own tribe, dominated the government and were the principal beneficiaries of the state's spending, which was concentrated on the capital, Ashgabat, and the surrounding Ahal province where the Teke are based. This favouritism was itself a source of the instability Niyazov most feared, because it confirmed to the Yomut, the Ersari, and the rest that the state was not theirs but a Teke instrument, and later observers noted his successor consciously trying to soften the worst of the economic imbalance precisely because undisguised tribal favouritism was, in the framework's own terms, a recipe for the kind of elite fracture that opens floors. The boundary of the settlement, then, was drawn twice: once around the presidential family and its immediate clients, who held the gas rent directly, and once, more broadly and less securely, around the Ahal Teke tribe, whose members filled the apparatus and whose dominance the other tribes were expected to accept as the price of order. Who got what in Turkmenistan is answered in one sentence:

the family took the rent, the tribe took the offices, and everyone else was to be bought quiet — which is the subject of Module 5.

MODULE 3 · THE ROBE — LAYING THE BELIEF OVER THE FORCE

Here is where the strangeness begins, and here is where it first dissolves. Niyazov's problem, established in Module 1, was that he ruled a state that was not a nation, from a tribe the other tribes resented, with no traditional or dynastic right to rule any of them. He could not borrow legitimacy from an existing national story, because there was no national story. He could not borrow it from Islam alone, because Islam belonged to no tribe in particular and gave him no special claim. He could not borrow it from the Soviet ideology that had just collapsed and taken its legitimacy with it. He had, in the framework's terms, no recognised currency of authority to draw on — so he manufactured one, and the manufacture is what the world calls his madness.

The centrepiece was the Ruhnama, the "Book of the Soul," published in two volumes from 2001. Read as literature it is a rambling blend of pseudo-history, moral instruction, autobiography, and myth, and Western commentary has treated it almost entirely as an object of ridicule. Read as a robe it is a precise and rational instrument, because of what it actually does: it supplies the Turkmen with a single, unified, glorious national past, centred on a common mythical ancestor, Oguz Khan, from whom all the tribes are said to descend — and it makes Niyazov the author, interpreter, and living heir of that past. The genius of the move, cynical or sincere, is that it attacks Niyazov's exact structural weakness at its root. A people fragmented

into rival tribes is handed a story in which they are one people, descended from one ancestor, with one destiny — and the man who wrote the story, who alone can interpret it, who has fused his own biography into its final chapters, becomes the indispensable centre of the identity he has just created. The Ruhnama was made mandatory in every school, tested in job interviews and driving examinations, displayed in mosques beside the Quran, and its passages cited in sermons. Niyazov declared that to read it three times was to be assured a place in heaven. This is not the behaviour of a man who has lost his grip on reality. It is the behaviour of a man building, at industrial speed, the shared formation his state did not have and could not survive without.

The calendar renaming reads the same way once the lens is right. Renaming January "Türkmenbaşy" after his own title, April "Gurbansoltan" after his mother, and September "Ruhnama" after his book looks, from outside, like pure narcissism, and the vanity is surely real. But structurally it is the same move as the book: it writes the ruler and his myth into the most unavoidable infrastructure of daily life, the calendar every citizen uses to name every day, so that the identity Niyazov is manufacturing is rehearsed by the whole population every time they speak a date. The gold statue that rotated to face the sun did the same work in the physical landscape of the capital that the calendar did in time. These were not the indulgences of a ruler who could afford them because he was secure; they were the tools of a ruler who was structurally insecure and knew it, building the thick belief that alone could make his narrow floor of force cheap enough to hold. The title he took, Türkmenbaşy — "Head of the

Turkmen," leader of all of them, above every tribe — states the whole project in a single word.

The robe was aimed, in the framework's terms, at one primary audience: the domestic population, all the tribes at once, who had to be converted from a fractured collection of lineages into a single people whose identity ran through the president. It was not built to persuade the outside world, which is why it looks absurd from outside — it was never addressed to us. Toward the outside world Niyazov ran an entirely different and much quieter robe, the doctrine of "permanent neutrality," formally recognised by the United Nations in 1995 and later written into the renamed month of December, "Bitaraplyk," neutrality itself. That second robe was cut for a different audience — the great powers, Russia and Iran and later China — and it said something the first robe did not need to: that Turkmenistan would take no side, join no bloc, host no base, and thus give no neighbour a reason to interfere with it. One floor of force, two robes, each addressed to a different audience that would never hear the other's version — the internal cult of the manufactured nation, and the external promise of harmless neutrality.

MODULE 4 · FORMATION — INSTALLING THE BELIEF IN EACH GENERATION

A robe manufactured in a single decade has a problem the ancient orders in this collection did not: it has had no time to become thick. The belief systems this framework has watched run themselves cheaply — Christendom, the Sunni synthesis, the Mandate of Heaven — took centuries to drive into a population deeply enough that the governed enforced them for free. Niyazov did not have centuries; he had his own lifetime. So the striking feature of formation in Turkmenistan is its speed and its saturation — the deliberate, total insertion of the new belief into every institution capable of installing it, compressed into a span so short that the artificiality is still visible, which is exactly why the outside world can see the machinery that a thousand-year-old robe would have long since buried.

The instrument was the school, backed by the workplace and the state ceremony. The Ruhnama was not merely taught; for years it was close to the entire humanities curriculum, assigned hours every week from primary school through university, its themes the substance of a quarter or more of the national university entrance examination. Niyazov simultaneously cut and partly dismantled the inherited Soviet education system — shortening schooling, purging foreign and technical content — while injecting his own book as the primary text, an exchange that told against the country's actual human capital but made complete sense as formation: a population educated in the

Ruhnama and little else is a population formed to the ruler's myth and disarmed of the outside knowledge that might contradict it. The good subject this system aimed to produce is legible in the requirements themselves — a Turkmen who knew the Ruhnama, revered the president as the author of the nation, understood himself as heir to Oguz Khan's glory, and needed no other framework to make sense of his place. The physician's oath to Niyazov in place of Hippocrates', the recitation of Ruhnama passages as daily routine, the display of the book in mosques: each was a formation ritual, rehearsing the belief through the institutions — medicine, religion, the school — that a population trusts most.

The yearly calendar, once renamed, became a formation instrument in its own right, which is the deeper logic beneath what looked like vanity in Module 3. A calendar is the one text every citizen must use every day, and a calendar whose months are the ruler, his mother, his book, and his doctrine of neutrality rehearses the whole robe, silently and constantly, in the mouth of every person who names a date. Formation could hardly be cheaper or more total. And yet its very speed left it thin in the framework's precise sense — installed by decree rather than driven deep across generations — which is why it required so much visible enforcement to hold, and why, as the next module shows, it had to be backed by something more reliable than belief. When Niyazov's successor reversed the calendar in 2008 and let the Ruhnama fade from the schools, the population absorbed the change without visible distress, which tells its own story: the belief had been installed widely but not deeply, worn like a uniform rather than held like a conviction, and a uniform can be changed.

MODULE 5 · THE COST COLUMN — WHY EACH SUBJECT COMPLIES

For the ordinary Turkmen, the ledger that governs whether to comply or resist has an entry on the benefit side that almost no other order in this collection can match, and it is the key that unlocks the whole case. From independence, Niyazov made natural gas, electricity, water, and salt free to every citizen — not cheap, free — and his successor added petrol to the list. A population sitting atop one of the world's great gas reserves was given the gas itself for nothing, its homes heated and its stoves lit at no charge, its power and water supplied by the state as a birthright of citizenship. This is the rentier bargain in its purest form, and it changes the cost column of every subject in the country at a stroke. The framework teaches that compliance is a sum: the benefit of going along weighed against the cost of resistance. Niyazov loaded the benefit side so heavily that the sum came out in his favour for almost everyone, almost all the time, without a single argument having to be won. Why would a population resist a ruler who asks little of them in taxes — because he does not need their taxes — and gives them the necessities of life for free?

This is the deeper reason the strange cult could be tolerated rather than resented into rebellion. A people whose material needs are met by the state, and who have never known political freedom to miss it, have a benefit column full enough that the eccentricities at the top — the statue, the book, the renamed months — register as the price of

an arrangement that feeds them, not as intolerable oppression. The gas rent does the work that deep formation does in older orders: it makes the floor of force cheap by making compliance rational for the ordinary person, whatever he privately thinks of the Ruhnama. And it does something formation cannot — it requires no belief at all. A cynic and a true believer both turn on the free gas in the morning, and both have the same reason not to rebel.

The cost side of the ledger was held up, meanwhile, by an apparatus that grew more visible exactly when the benefit side wavered. After a 2002 assassination attempt — or what the state called one — Niyazov flooded the capital with soldiers and closed-circuit cameras, telling the population, in words that could have been drawn from this framework's own account of surveillance, that the measures were not a sign of distrust but a means of maintaining order. The framework reads them the other way: visible surveillance is the tell of a belief that has not fully taken, the cost dial cranked up to compensate for a benefit dial that a manufactured, decade-old robe could not fill on its own. The border was sealed, the internet throttled to among the slowest and most controlled on earth, emigration restricted, exit foreclosed — and foreclosed exit, the framework teaches, is what lets an extractor hold a population without meeting the price a people free to leave could command. The Turkmen subject complied, then, for two reasons running together: the gas made compliance genuinely worth his while, and the sealed border and the secret police made the alternative unthinkable. Belief was the thinnest of the three, which is why it needed the other two so badly.

MODULE 6 · EXTRACTION — FOLLOWING THE SURPLUS

The extraction in Turkmenistan runs in the opposite direction from most orders in this collection, and the inversion is worth stating plainly because it explains the free-gas bargain that would otherwise seem impossibly generous. In a classic agrarian order the apex extracts a surplus from the labour of its own population — the tax on the harvest, the corvée, the rent. In a rentier gas state the apex extracts its surplus from a foreign buyer, and the domestic population is not primarily a source of revenue to be squeezed but a source of potential instability to be pacified. The free gas at home is not generosity; it is the cheapest available insurance against the one thing the rent cannot buy directly, which is the population's quiescence. The surplus is taken from China, and a slice of it is spent keeping the Turkmen quiet.

The mechanics are stark in their simplicity and their vulnerability. Turkmenistan's gas flows out through pipelines, and pipelines run to specific places and cannot be quickly redirected — which means the country's entire revenue depends on who holds the other end of the pipe. Through the 1990s and 2000s the buyers were Russia and Iran; a series of disputes, a pipeline explosion in 2009, and shifting prices reduced both to marginal customers, and by the 2020s Turkmenistan sold the overwhelming majority of its gas to a single buyer, China, much of it not even for cash but to service the debt Turkmenistan owed China for building the pipeline and developing the fields in the

first place. This is extraction with a knife at its own throat: a rentier state whose rent depends on one foreign buyer holds its wealth monopoly at that buyer's sufferance, and the framework flags the concentration as the order's gravest long-term vulnerability, sharper even than any internal threat.

The strain showed most clearly when the rent fell. After gas prices collapsed in 2014 and the Russian and Iranian markets closed, the revenue that funded the free-gas bargain came under pressure, and the state began, cautiously and against its own founding promise, to walk the subsidies back — installing gas and water meters in homes that had never had them, capping the free allocation, and by the end of the decade phasing the subsidies out substantially altogether. One official let slip at a conference that free gas was costing the state some five billion dollars a year. Reading this through the framework: the extractor was caught between two costs, the cost of continuing to buy the population's quiescence with free gas and the cost of losing the export revenue that quiescence was meant to protect, and when the rent shrank he was forced to choose. That the state chose to claw back the subsidy — to risk the population's grievance rather than forgo the export earnings — tells you which the apex feared more, and it is a genuine crack worth watching, because it removes, slowly, the very benefit that made the ordinary subject's compliance rational in the first place.

MODULE 7 · INFORMATION AND SUPPRESSION — MAINTAINING THE BELIEF, CRUSHING THE DISSENT

The information order in Turkmenistan is among the most closed on earth, and the framework predicts exactly this, because a robe as thin and as recently manufactured as Niyazov's cannot survive competition. A belief driven deep over centuries can tolerate some daylight; a belief installed by decree in a single decade cannot, because the moment a population can compare the official story to any other it notices the seams. So the seam — the chokepoint between the people and the knowledge they cannot independently check — is held in Turkmenistan with a totality that even other authoritarian states rarely match. There is no independent media of any kind. The internet is not merely censored but throttled to near-uselessness and routed entirely through a state monopoly, one of the slowest and most surveilled in the world. Foreign travel is restricted, foreign broadcasts jammed or blocked, foreign books and curricula purged. The country produces, in the framework's terms, no significant record of public debate about its own history, because the only permitted version of that history was the one in the Ruhnama.

The interpreter class here is not a priesthood or an academy but the state media apparatus and the security service that stands behind it, and the two valves the framework watches for are both wide open. The inflow valve — what the population is fed — runs day and night: state television of the president singing, shooting, racing horses,

DJing at New Year, the imagery of a strong and benevolent leader rehearsed without pause. The outflow valve — what the population is prevented from seeing — is held shut by the sealed border and the throttled internet, so that the alternative readings that might contradict the official one are not so much rebutted as simply kept out of reach. This is the cheaper of the two techniques the framework describes: it is easier to leave an alternative unavailable than to argue against it, and Turkmenistan has built its entire information order around unavailability.

Suppression of actual dissent is real and brutal but, tellingly, rarely needs to be spectacular, because the sealed information order means dissent struggles to organise or even to find shared language in the first place. The state's security apparatus, inherited from the Soviet KGB and undiminished, disappears critics into a prison system from which some never emerge; the fate of those imprisoned after the 2002 alleged assassination attempt, some of whom vanished entirely, is a standing warning. But the framework's deeper point is that a well-sealed seam makes heavy suppression less necessary, not more, because a population that cannot coordinate, cannot compare notes, and cannot access any account of its situation but the official one is a population that mostly polices itself into silence. The rare forced opening of the seam — a human-rights documentary smuggled out, a diaspora news site reporting from exile — is met not with argument but with denial and with pressure on the exiles' families still inside, the other two monopolies moving to reseal the leak exactly as the framework predicts. The information order, in short, is the leg of the

tripod that Niyazov's thin robe most needed, and the state spends accordingly to hold it.

MODULE 8 · ELITE COORDINATION AND THE DEFAULT — AND ITS BREAKDOWN INTO ELITE CHAOS

Everything so far has concerned the population below, and everything so far has been, in the framework's terms, the solved part of the problem — the gas bought the people, the cult and the sealed border held them, and none of it was ever seriously in doubt. The real problem, the one that has actually threatened every ruler Turkmenistan has had, sits at the top, among the family and the elite, and it is here that the strangeness fully resolves into logic, because it is here that the strangest single fact about Turkmenistan — that it became the first hereditary monarchy in modern Central Asia — turns out to be the most rational move on the board.

Consider the position of the elite in a state like this. There is no institution outside the presidency — no independent party, no legislature with real power, no court, no private economy, no free press. The framework's tripod of violence, wealth, and information is not merely held by one coalition; it is held by one man and his immediate family. This total fusion, which Module 2 identified as the mark of a foreclosed order, is wonderfully stable in one direction and terrifyingly unstable in another. It is stable against the population, who have no lever to pull. It is unstable against the succession, because when everything runs through one man, the moment that man dies or weakens, there is no rule, no institution, and no procedure to decide who holds the fused monopoly next — only a

naked scramble among whoever is positioned to grab it. This is the open problem this whole framework identifies as the durable hierarchy's deepest vulnerability, and in a personalist rentier autocracy it is at its very sharpest, because the prize is not a share of power but the whole of it, indivisible, held by whoever wins.

Niyazov's own death in December 2006 showed the danger in miniature. He had named no clear successor, and the constitutional order of succession was simply set aside; the chairman of parliament, who should have taken over, was instead arrested, and power passed through a rapid, opaque negotiation among the security elite to Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, the health minister and former dentist, who emerged as the agreed candidate and won the managed election that followed. The country came through it without visible violence, but the process was exactly the dangerous scramble the framework warns of — a handful of men behind closed doors deciding who would hold everything, with nothing but their own calculation to constrain them. Berdimuhamedow, having seen how close to the edge that ran, spent his own presidency solving the problem his predecessor had left unsolved, and the solution he reached is the dynastic succession the world found so absurd.

In 2022 Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow did something almost no dictator does: he stepped down from the presidency while still alive and in reasonable health, and handed it to his son Serdar through a snap election in which the outcome was never in doubt. Read as vanity or as simple nepotism this looks strange — why give up the top office at all? Read through the framework it is the single most rational

move available to a man in his position, and it solves the exact problem that nearly broke the order in 2006. By transferring power while still alive, Gurbanguly could supervise the transition, watch how the elite and the security services reacted to the new man, and step back in if it went wrong — none of which is possible for a ruler who waits until death to hand over. By installing his own son, he kept the fused monopoly inside the family, where the trust that a personalist order cannot get from institutions can at least be got from blood. And by keeping for himself the newly empowered chairmanship of the Halk Maslahaty, the People's Council, together with a bespoke lifetime title — Arkadag, National Leader of the Turkmen People, carrying legal immunity for himself and his family and making him, as council chairman, next in line to the presidency — he ensured that the real power did not actually leave his hands at all. The son holds the office; the father holds the power; the succession is rehearsed and stabilised while the founder still lives to correct it. This is not the comic-opera nepotism the headlines described. It is a solution, and a clever one, to the hardest problem this framework studies.

The framework's own menu of solutions to the elite problem clarifies what the Berdimuhamedows chose. They did not export a surplus elite, prevent one from forming by recruiting outsiders, or rotate officials to stop them consolidating. They chose the family — co-optation by kinship in its most literal form, the fusion of the state with a single bloodline — and they embedded it not in one man's personal restraint but in reconstructed institutions, the Halk Maslahaty rebuilt with the father at its head, the constitutional order

amended to fit the arrangement. And the drift the framework tells us to watch for is already visible: within a year the tandem strained, the father reasserting his primacy over a son who had begun taking foreign trips and making decisions on his own, and the family itself fracturing, with Serdar reportedly moving against his own cousins and forcing some to flee the country. The dynasty solved the succession problem the framework identifies, but it did not abolish the problem beneath it — it relocated the scramble from the security elite at large to the inside of a single family, where fathers, sons, and cousins now hold the daggers. The gas can buy the whole population; it cannot buy trust between a father and a son who both know that everything runs through whoever holds the top.

MODULE 9 · PLURALITY OR FORECLOSURE — THE VARIABLE ON WHICH LIBERTY TURNS

Turkmenistan is as close to total foreclosure as any order in this collection, and the framework's own vocabulary makes the diagnosis fast: the three monopolies of violence, wealth, and trusted information are not merely held by one coalition but fused in one family, with no counterweight anywhere that the family does not own. There is no independent court, no legislature that is not a rubber stamp, no press, no legal opposition party worth the name — the two permitted "opposition" parties are loyalist creations — no private economic base, no religious authority independent of the state, no civil association the state has not chartered. On every standard external measure of political and civil freedom the country sits at or near the absolute bottom, ranked alongside North Korea and Eritrea as one of the most closed societies on earth. There is, in the framework's terms, no seam through which pressure from below could ever become reform, because there is no institution outside the ruler's grip from which such pressure could be organised or funded in the first place.

The framework's harder teaching is why this foreclosure is so stable, and the answer returns to the gas. In many foreclosed orders the pressure that cannot release as reform stores up until it ruptures — but rupture, this framework insists, comes not from the rising of the ruled but from a crack in the floor above, and Turkmenistan has, for

now, sealed most of the cracks. The population is bought by the free-gas bargain and cannot coordinate through the sealed information order, so pressure from below barely builds at all. The elite is fused into the family and the security apparatus, with no independent base from which a rival faction could organise. The external threat is managed by the neutrality doctrine and the gas that makes Turkmenistan useful to keep stable. What remains, and what the framework tells us to watch, are the cracks the order cannot fully seal: the succession, which the dynasty has stabilised but not solved, and which now runs through the fault lines of a single family; and the gas rent itself, which funds everything and depends on a single foreign buyer and a commodity price the ruler does not control. The order is foreclosed against its people almost perfectly. It is exposed, as every order finally is, at the seams of its own elite and the base of its own wealth.

It is worth stating plainly, because the framework's discipline demands the honest counter-weight, that this foreclosure has purchased something the population values, or at least has never known the absence of. Turkmenistan has been genuinely stable and genuinely at peace across three decades in a turbulent region, has avoided the civil wars and colour revolutions that convulsed its neighbours, and has kept its people housed, warmed, and fed on the gas rent even through the lean years. The order is a cage, and the framework will not pretend otherwise; but it is a cage that has, so far, delivered the physical security and material subsistence that its people, formed to expect nothing else, weigh heavily on the benefit side of their own ledgers. Whether that bargain survives the clawing-

back of the subsidies and the strains inside the ruling family is the open question on which the order's future, and its people's, now turns.

MODULE 10 · CHANGE AND COLLAPSE — HOW THE ORDER ENDS

Turkmenistan has not collapsed, and the point of this module for a living order is to read where its cracks actually run rather than to narrate an ending that has not come. The framework's rule is firm and, for this case, clarifying: durable orders do not fall because the ruled finally rise; they fall when the floor cracks from within the elite, through fracture, exhaustion, conquest, or a surplus of claimants the order cannot absorb. Turkmenistan has faced one genuine succession crisis already, at Niyazov's death in 2006, and it passed through it not by any popular event but exactly as the framework predicts — a closed negotiation among the security elite, a set-aside constitution, an arrested rival, an agreed new man. The population was a spectator. The whole drama happened inside the apex, which is where this framework says the drama always happens.

The dynasty was built to prevent a repeat, and Module 8 has read it as a rational solution. But the framework tells us that a solution to the elite problem is never permanent, only a deferral, and it names the specific ways this particular deferral could fail. The most immediate is the fracture the record already shows beginning: the father-son tandem straining within a year, the reported purge of the founder's own nephews, the possibility of a contest between Serdar and some other family member — a cousin, or in time the founder's grandson Kerimguly, already being groomed in public appearances beside his grandfather. A dynasty concentrates the succession problem into a

bloodline, which stabilises it against outsiders but sharpens it within the family, and Central Asia's own recent history, in the violent unravelling of Kazakhstan's succession tandem in January 2022, is precisely the cautionary example the Berdimuhamedows were watching when they designed their own. The second crack is the gas rent, and it is the one least within the ruler's control: an order funded entirely by selling one commodity to one buyer is an order whose floor can be cracked by a price collapse or a buyer's change of mind, neither of which any amount of internal control can prevent. The clawing-back of the free-gas subsidy, traced in Module 6, is the sound of that crack being managed in advance — the ruler removing the population's benefit before he is forced to, and thereby, on the framework's own logic, slowly draining the benefit column that made his people's compliance rational in the first place. If the order ever does fall, the framework predicts the sequence: not a rising, but a rent shock or a family fracture at the top, with the population entering only afterward, as the weight one broken faction swings.

MODULE 11 · THE GRIM ACCOUNTING — COUNTING THE COST ON EVERY SIDE

The cost of the Turkmen order, weighed honestly on both sides as this framework requires, is real but of a particular and comparatively modest kind by the standards of the cases in this collection. It is not an order that has killed on a mass scale; there has been no famine of policy, no war of conquest, no collapse-driven die-off, and the framework's metabolic-death test — which asks how much life-sustaining coordination an order performs and therefore how catastrophic its removal would be — returns a low number, because the coordination the state performs is real but the state is not, in the manner of the Inca storehouses or the Soviet grain system, the thing standing between its people and starvation. What the order has cost is measured instead in the currency of foreclosed lives: three decades of a population denied any political voice, any free press, any independent thought permitted to organise; a dismantled education system that told against a whole generation's human capital; dissidents disappeared into prisons from which some never returned; a people sealed off from the world behind the slowest internet on earth and a closed border. These are real costs, and the framework counts them at full weight without inflating them into a body count the record does not show.

Against them stand the genuine achievements the framework's discipline insists on crediting in the same breath. The order kept the peace in a region that saw civil war in Tajikistan, revolution and

massacre in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and the long catastrophe next door in Afghanistan. It held together a state that began as a fractured collection of tribes with no history of unity and might plausibly have come apart along those tribal seams, as other post-Soviet fragments came apart along theirs. It delivered, through the gas rent, three decades of subsidised subsistence to a population that had known Soviet poverty. The conqueror's syllogism — that because some order was necessary, this order was justified — is one the framework refuses, and it refuses it here: the peace and the unity and the subsistence were real, and they did not require the disappeared dissidents or the sealed border or the cult to achieve them. The achievement was genuine; the price was higher than the achievement needed; both are true, and the framework holds them together rather than letting either erase the other.

MODULE 12 · CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE — READING THE CASE AGAINST THE CORPUS

Read against the rest of this collection, Turkmenistan converges on the framework's deepest patterns precisely where it looks most singular, and that convergence is the study's whole payoff. Its manufactured national cult is the same move, made in a decade rather than a century, that every young or insecure order in this corpus has made to convert a narrow floor of force into a cheap self-holding one — the Ruhnama is Niyazov's version of a founding scripture, Oguz Khan his version of a unifying ancestor-myth, and the only thing that makes it look absurd rather than venerable is that we watched it being built. Its dynastic succession is the same solution to the same open problem — how a fused, personalist apex hands power on without a scramble — that this framework has traced across orders from the Ottomans to the steppe khanates, co-optation by kinship embedded in reconstructed institutions, chosen from the identical short menu of answers every durable hierarchy draws on. Its rentier bargain is the cleanest example in the whole corpus of the framework's claim that a full-enough benefit column makes belief almost optional: the free gas holds the population without requiring them to believe anything at all, which is why the thin, manufactured robe could survive being so visibly artificial.

The divergence worth naming is what the gas does to the whole structure, because it is genuinely unusual. Most orders in this

collection must extract their surplus from their own people, which forces a bargain — the extractor must leave the population enough to live, must not push past the revolt threshold, must give something to get something. The gas severs that bargain. An order funded from abroad does not need its people productive, or free, or even willing; it needs them quiet, and it can buy quiet directly with a slice of the foreign rent. This is why Turkmenistan can be simultaneously one of the most resource-rich and most politically foreclosed states on earth without the contradiction the framework would expect in an order that had to tax its own: the rent frees the ruler from needing his people at all, and a ruler who does not need his people has no reason to concede them anything. The case confirms the framework's core and sharpens one of its variables — that the source of the surplus, domestic labour versus foreign rent, predicts how much the apex must bargain with its own population, and thus how foreclosed it can afford to be.

The strongest counter-position deserves the last word, and it is not that Turkmenistan is merely strange, which this study has spent twelve modules dissolving. It is the harder claim that reading the order as coherent risks making it seem more solid, more designed, more inevitable than it is — that the Berdimuhamedows may be improvising as much as engineering, that the dynasty may fracture next year, that the whole edifice may prove far more brittle than its apparent logic suggests. The framework grants the point and holds its own discipline against it: to read an order's logic is not to predict its survival, and every solution this collection studies is a deferral rather than a cure. Turkmenistan is coherent and it is fragile at once,

coherent in the logic that built it and fragile at the two seams — the family and the gas — that logic cannot finally close. That it is legible does not mean it will last. It means only that when it changes, it will change where the framework says to look: not in a rising of the quiet, bought, sealed-in people, but at the top, among the few who hold the gas and the guns and the name.

A Note on Sources

The framework is Thomas J. Bryan's; the research and drafting are Claude's (Anthropic). Niyazov's rise, the personality cult, the Ruhnama, the calendar renaming of 2002 and its 2008 reversal, and the eccentric decrees follow the standard reference and journalistic record, including the English Wikipedia entries on Niyazov and the Ruhnama, contemporary reporting, and the retrospective accounts in the regional press. The tribal structure — Teke, Yomut, Ersari and the minor tribes, the Ahal Teke dominance of the apex, and the Oguz Khan single-ancestor myth as a deliberate unifying instrument — follows the area-studies and ethnographic literature, including GlobalSecurity's survey of Turkmen tribes, the Facts and Details compilation drawing on U.S. diplomatic cables, and the academic study of tribal social systems and political stability. The gas economy, the free-utility subsidy regime and its rollback, the reserve estimates and their contested inflation, and the concentration of exports on China follow the International Energy Agency and Enerdata country profiles, the Asian Development Bank's 2024–2028 country partnership documentation, the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies on the gas-monetisation challenge, Eurasianet and Jamestown Foundation reporting on the subsidy cuts, and the International Relations Review analysis of Chinese dependence. The 2006 succession, the 2022 dynastic transfer, the Halk Maslahaty's reconstitution, the Arkadag and National Leader titles and their

attached immunity, the tandem strain, and the intra-family purges follow Chatham House, the Diplomat, Foreign Policy, Global Voices, the Caspian Policy Center, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the Wikipedia and Grokipedia entries on Serdar Berdimuhamedow and the 2022 election, cross-checked where possible. Where figures are contested throughout — gas reserves, subsidy costs, and above all the country's reported election returns and turnout, which are not credible as counts — the study reads them for what they reveal about the order rather than accepting them as fact. Turkmenistan is among the most closed societies on earth, and much of its elite politics is genuinely unobservable; where this study reaches the limit of the record it marks the limit rather than writing past it. *Part of the collection* Patterns of Power. *Tested, never revealed.*